

International Interlibrary Loan Committee Survey Report: An Overview

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The STARS International Interlibrary Loan Committee conducted a survey of US libraries in 2007 to assess the current practices regarding international ILL. Of 157 survey participants, 52% self-identified as part of a university or college library, 39% with a medical or special library, and 9% with a public, law or state library. The majority of respondents represented libraries with fewer than 10,000 annual ILL transactions. The survey did not ask what percentage of these transactions was international. However, 94% participated in both international borrowing and lending. An additional 5% participated in international lending only. The remaining 1% (n=2) did not participate in either and thus completed the survey in error.

One very simple thing libraries could do to help with international ILL is to make sure their ILL Policies Directory entries are updated. Despite 94% participation in some form of international ILL, 52% of respondents were either weren't sure if they were or were not listed as international lenders in the Policies Directory.

The respondents identified several factors that influence their decisions to participate in international ILL. Factors weighed when considering the borrowing and lending of returnables were geographic location, delivery time, risk of loss or damage, international shipping costs, and lending fees. These factors led some libraries to impose restrictions to their international requesting including only borrowing from Canada and subject-specific materials that represented unique research interests on their campuses.

The next table on your handout shows the top five countries with which U.S. libraries conduct international ILL transactions. The top three do not differ between lending and borrowing. Japan makes both lists though at different positions. I was somewhat surprised to see Denmark as a top borrower, but perhaps we hit some specialized collections in our survey respondents. In addition to telling us their top countries, some respondents told us who they won't do business with including Mexico and several other South and Central American countries while others only do business with Canada.

Also included in that table are the formats most frequently cited as unable to lend or borrow. While there was some variation in ranking (which actually isn't reflected in the table), the materials are the same between the two sides of ILL. While somewhat interesting, I doubt these formats would change much if we asked about domestic ILL.

We also queried the survey participants about their citation and holdings verification methods. 68% of respondents routinely attempt to verify citations prior to sending requests, 20% verify whenever possible, and (I can't decide whether I should be happy about this number or not) 9% never attempt to verify. When asked about verification of borrowing citations, the numbers take a downturn, which we attribute to the prevailing idea that borrowers are responsible for citation verification.

The same holds true for holdings verification with 86% attempting to verify holdings. 10% do not try to verify holdings. As a companion lending question, we asked whether libraries try to refer requests to other libraries. 40% indicated they try to refer, 19% refer when time allows, and 41% do not refer.

To gauge the bibliographic tools used by U.S. libraries for citation and holdings verification, the survey presented an open-ended question. The most commonly used tools are shown on the next graph on your handout.

Not surprisingly, OCLC (B=30%, L=25%) and email (B=29%, L=16%) were the most frequently used and preferred methods of communication. Unfortunately, the survey did not include DOCLINE as an option, but 24% of respondents included it as a write in. There is no way to know the divide between borrowing and lending in the case of DOCLINE.

U.S. libraries overwhelmingly use and prefer OCLC IFM as a payment method. This, of course, is problematic when dealing with international libraries which largely do not participate in IFM. Other payment issues raised by survey respondents included difficulties with currency conversion, inability to pay in or accept a foreign currency, inability to accept wire transfers, possible payment methods don't match accepted payment methods, and payments received in a form other than accepted payment methods. Some libraries avoid these obstacles by establishing reciprocal agreements with international libraries. Other libraries may want to weigh the time savings and their volume of borrowing against the monetary costs of providing free lending to an international library.

The majority of respondents use USPS as their primary carrier indicating that the benefits of using USPS, convenience and cost, outweigh those of other carriers, speed and tracking. FedEx and UPS were used by a nearly identical percentage of respondents at 26% and 25%, respectively.

In addition to the two findings listed on your handout, I'd also like to mention three others.

- Electronic delivery of non-returnables could improve turnaround time and remove the cost and payment barriers experienced by some libraries.
- Digitization of public domain materials could be an effective way to eliminate preservation and conservation concerns.
- A website listing major national bibliographic discovery tools as well as international fee-based document delivery services will help libraries borrow more effectively. Many of these resources are already gathered on the ShareILL website. Additional promotion of this resource may be the answer.

Libraries are discouraged by the complexity of cross-border payments as borrowers and lenders. While OCLC and DOCLINE have been successful and popular among U.S. libraries, they are not used as frequently by international libraries and thus are not as helpful as tools for international lending and borrowing.

Many respondents preferred providing or requesting only non-returnables because of international shipping and handling costs and the risks associated with lending materials overseas.

The committee developed some suggestions based on what we think the needs of the community are, which you will see listed on your handout. I'd be happy to take more suggestions in a moment.

Finally, you'll see some upcoming committee endeavors listed on your handout and hope you will watch for our article and news regarding the ILDS presentation. I'm looking forward to further committee accomplishments under the leadership of our new Chair, Heather Weltin.